

## **Student Veterans/Military Testimony**

May 24, 2011

**The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor is honored to serve our students who are serving or who have served in the United States Military.**

In 2010 the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor was named as a one of the top Military Friendly Schools by GI Jobs Magazine. This puts the university in the top 15% of all colleges, universities and schools nationwide.

We were also one of the birthplaces of the Student Veterans of America with our own alumni Derek Blumke serving as the first President of the National Student Veterans of America organization.

Some information about our student veteran/military population:

- We have approximately 250 veterans/military on the Ann Arbor Campus, with about 50% of those as undergraduate students
- We had 58 dependants of service members collecting VA benefits during the 2010/2011 academic year.
- Our veteran/military student population is comprised of all branches of the military
- Undergraduates are usually prior enlisted and graduate/professionals are usually prior officers

In the Spring of 2008, in response to our student veterans' concerns, the University of Michigan started the Student Veterans Assistance Program. Located in of the Office of New Student programs, The Student Veterans Assistance Program [SVAP] helps students make the transition from the military to life at the University of Michigan and help serve their needs as they complete their educational goals.

My name is Philip Larson and I have coordinated the program since summer 2008. I am a Veteran of the United States Air Force. I served 4 years active duty before I started my college education at Indiana University, Bloomington and served in the Air Force Reserve for 2 ½ years while studying at IU. I have a Master's in Education and have worked in Student Affairs offices at 3 universities before joining the University of Michigan. It is my experience as a veteran, a student veteran and years of working in higher education that make this role such a good fit.

The Student Veterans Assistance Program at U-M helps students in the following ways:

**We create a welcoming environment for student veterans and students with military service**

We create a welcoming environment on a very personal basis. I answer on average about 6 e-mails and 4 phone calls a week. That works out to about 140 contacts a semester and about 100 more in the summer months. These calls or e-mails usually are about the university admissions process or about GI Bill benefits.

I personally meet all incoming undergraduate student veterans/military at New Student Orientation where, answer any questions they may have, provide them with my contact information and give them their first official university t-shirt. In short, I serve as a point of contact for those with military service as they enter into the University.

### **SVAP assists students who are deploying or who may deploy**

SVAP serves as an informational source and advocate for students who are deploying or might be deployed. It provides students with pre and post deployment check-lists, to make their transition from or back to the university efficient. It advocates for policies that are considerate of deployment needs and restrictions. I encourage students to keep in regular contact with me while they deploy so that I can assist in their return to academic life.

Please let me share with you a story about one of our students. Tom (not his real name) was a Marine in Iraq. His job while in the military was the turret gunner on a Humvee, which means he was constantly exposed to enemy fire and at constant risk from IED's (improvised explosive devices). He shared with me a story I will never forget. He was on foot patrol, walking behind a tank when the tank's gunner was killed by sniper fire. They moved the soldier's body to the main body of the tank and told Tom to take the man's position. Tom described a scene that I won't repeat here but it was horrific and left a permanent scar on his memory.

Tom walked into my office one day and told me that the Marine Corps was going to call him up from the Individual Ready Reserves and put him back on Active Duty and send him back to Iraq. I never saw a person more scared in my life. SVAP along with many other offices and departments managed to get Tom a waiver, because of his continuing studies, and this saved him from being redeployed. He graduated last year with a Fulbright Scholarship to continue his studies.

### **SVAP advocates for students who have or are serving in the military.**

I chair the U-M Council on Student Veterans, which includes representatives from Admissions, the Registrar's Office, Financial Aid, Services for Students with Disabilities, University Housing, the Career Center, various schools and colleges, and other offices and departments. This collaboration has probably been the most important part of our framework designed to assist with student veteran academic success. Not only do the members who sit on the Council volunteer to help with our Veterans Day Programs and other events, they also serve as point

people to whom I can send student veterans/military with specific concerns or questions. They also help solve and correct potential barriers to student success.

For instance, when the Post 911 GI Bill was first being introduced, I predicted that the VA might not be fully ready to process all benefit claims and rework how they pay for veterans to go to college. The delay in tuition payments concerned me because that could leave student veterans facing late payments fees, holds on their accounts, the inability to register for classes and other potential barriers to their education. We quickly assembled a group of experts in the summer of 2009 and put in place a third-party payer system that allowed the University to put money into the accounts of students who will receive the Post 911 GI Bill and bypass any negative consequences due to the delay of tuition money, from the VA, to the University. We are one of the few Universities in the country to have such a system in place our model is used at several other Universities.

The leadership of our four student veterans/military student organizations, Student Veterans of America, Ross Business Veterans, Armed Forces Medical Student Association, and Social Workers for Veterans, sit on the U-M Council on Student Veterans and play a key role in our decision making process and future goals.

Another way we advocate for student veterans/military is through our "Veteran Friendly Cards" I included one in the packets I passed out. Basically, it is a card that a faculty or staff can display if they agree to the terms on the back. This lets students know that a faculty or staff member is supportive of that individual student and their military service.

**U-M Veterans website: [www.vets.umich.edu](http://www.vets.umich.edu)**

The website serves as an online portal to the program. It provides information to current, prospective and newly admitted students about the program, the university, applying to the university, VA educational benefits, and resources available to them as students and veterans. The website links to inside and outside resources including the VA and sites that help with PTSD.

**Event planning and outreach**

SVAP offers events and programs that help facilitate opportunities for students who have served in the military and faculty and staff who have served to meet, socialize and network. SVAP also offers educational programming to veterans/military on how academic success, career counseling and programming to the larger university about student veterans including the 2010 campus-wide Symposium on Student Veterans/Military and our annual Veteran's Day Celebration.

### **“Vet to Vet” program**

All identified incoming veterans/military are matched with a current veteran volunteer who can answer questions and aid their transition to the university. This year we have identified over 500 faculty and staff within the university who have served in the military. We are in the first year of matching incoming veterans/military with faculty or staff veterans who can aid in that student’s transition.

### **Yellow Ribbon Program**

The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor has been a full partner in the Yellow Ribbon program since its inception in 2009. The Yellow Ribbon Program offsets unmet tuition need for veterans who are 100% eligible for the Post 911 GI Bill. Each university, and every school or college within a university, can limit the number or eligible students and dollar amount the university will contribute to matching funds from the VA. The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor is one of only a handful of public universities to offer unlimited matching funds to unlimited students to qualify for the program. This means that for those who meet the qualifications for the program the university will cover 50% of all unmet tuition need with the VA matching with another 50%.

The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor contributed \$357,000 during the 2010/2011 academic year. Our commitment to this program has made Michigan more affordable to many of our students as well as attracting highly qualified students to our graduate and professional schools. It also shows our commitment to our students who have served in the military.

### **Waiver of out-of-state tuition for regular active duty military living or stationed in Michigan**

Regular active duty military personnel who are living or stationed in Michigan, as well as their accompanying spouses and dependent children, are allowed to pay in-state tuition while they attend the University of Michigan. This waiver is available to persons in the military, Coast Guard and to officers in the Public Health Service.

### **Interest free loans to veterans/military**

The Office of Financial Aid offers up to \$500 in interest free loans to Veterans, military members and dependents the upper limit can be waived if students are waiting for their VA benefits.

### **Private scholarships for veterans and dependents**

Partnering with a private donor, the University of Michigan will now offer two \$1,000 scholarships to those veterans/military who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, and a \$1,000 scholarship to the spouse of a service member who has served in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor is constantly evaluating services to students who have served in the military and looking for ways we can improve. Our approach is student focused and student driven.

We see serving our veterans and military members not just the "right thing to do", which it is, but also we value the leadership, life experiences, world views, unique knowledge and unique backgrounds that our veterans and military members bring to our campus. They enrich our campus by their presence and we are honored to serve them and provide them with a world-class education.

They are truly the "Leaders and the Best."

### **Suggestions for the State of Michigan**

GI  
reimbursement  
First of all, thank you for addressing this issue. I have found our students who have served in the military to be among the best and the brightest I have seen. They are mature, focused and grounded students. These are not only the kind of people we want as our college students but people we would like to help rebuild the State of Michigan. Attracting these students to our state to study, learn and eventually live would be a wise investment in our future.

#### **Creation of a Michigan college gateway for Veterans/Military**

Most of the calls and emails I receive are from service members looking to apply to U-M. A good portion of the calls are from service men and women who either are not academically prepared to enter into the university or who have not assessed whether the University of Michigan is the right place for them. While I do stress there are many pathways to a Michigan education, I do have to refer individuals to other institutions. Collegeboard.org, a website that helps students decide their higher educational opportunities, listed 93 colleges and universities within Michigan for students to choose from. Setting up a website and a contact person who could help student veterans/military with their choice of colleges would encourage veterans/military to pursue a Michigan education.

Michigan offers a diversity of educational institutions to choose from. No college or university is right to every student. Based on many factors any institution within the state of Michigan could be the best fit for a student. Stressing this diversity on a website and also in print and video ads targeting military would increase enrollment of veterans/military within the state.

#### **Coordination of State-Wide "Best Practices"**

Again, the State of Michigan offers a diversity of higher educational opportunities. I would be careful in considering any kind of mandatory requirements or suggestions for serving our student veteran populations. What might work well for U-M Ann Arbor might not work at U-M Flint, Northern Michigan University, MSU or Cleary University. Instead, I would suggest that all of Michigan's colleges and universities engage in more collaboration conversation about our different programs; perhaps through activities such as drive-in conferences, a list serve or site visits. Additionally, an incentive for sharing could be grants to programs that have already implemented great programs and policies concerning student veterans/military and those within their 1<sup>st</sup> year of trying those programs out.

#### **Provide funding for schools to start a program like SVAP**

In these tough economic times many schools may be reluctant to take a risk and provide increased funding to help serve student veterans/military. A grant could be put in place to help universities, schools and colleges offset the cost of programs such as the SVAP program at the University of Michigan. This would be especially helpful for smaller universities and community colleges.

#### **A "Pure Michigan" ad campaign for Military Members**

Targeting military members through the Military Times magazines, the GI Jobs magazine as well as sending posters to each military base's educational officers might be helpful. These ads would talk about the excellent education offered by Michigan schools and the various educational opportunities within the state.

#### **Grants to military members/veterans or dependents**

Of course, any funding you can offer to service members and their families will play a large part in where they decide to spend their educational dollars. The Post 911 GI bill makes funding available to veterans and service members and in some cases their families. This rarely covers all of the student's expenses and any money that could be made available to further assist students would make Michigan more attractive to those who have served in the military.

I would be happy to talk further about these suggestions or consult about any idea to help our students who have served and their families.

I thank you for your interest in this matter. I thank you for your time today and I look forward to any questions you may have.